

Text: Ac 27.1

Today we turn our page in Acts and find ourselves in a new chapter. It is the second last chapter of the book of Acts. We are swiftly drawing to the close of our study here.

We began in January 2016, and I can see light at the end of the tunnel! We might get to the end of the book this year.

The bulk of the last two chapters of Acts is the story of Paul's voyage to Rome, including the famous shipwreck off Malta.

We will read the first few verses of the chapter, but I'll use the first verse alone as a text for our message:

Read Ac 27.1-8, text 1 "it was decided that we would sail for Italy"

The passage is an interesting story all by itself. Every commentary I've consulted praises Luke for being "at the top of his game" in writing this section of Acts. Almost all of them mention a book by James Smith, written in 1848, called, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*.

F. F. Bruce on Smith: "Smith, an experienced yachtsman and a man of no mean classical scholarship, made a careful study of Luke's narrative in relation to the route which it maps out—a part of the Mediterranean with which he himself was acquainted—and formed the most favorable estimate of the accuracy of Luke's account of each stage of the voyage."¹

Smith's book was so well done that modern commentators, 150 years later, still refer to it.

Now, the thing that first confronts us about the story of Paul's voyage and shipwreck is this:

"why does Luke include the narrative, and how does it fit into the purposes of the Acts?"²

Or, in other words, "is this anything more than an exciting shipwreck story?"

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 475–76.

² L. Scott Kellum, *Acts*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 296.

Our Title:

The Meaning of the Shipwreck

We aren't going to turn the story into an allegory, but we will use it to make an *analogy*. We all live in a chaotic and turbulent world. Our recent history brings that to our minds very clearly.

Our own church has seen massive change in the last two and a half years.

- We all endured the strain of Covid, and we are still here.
- We lost from our congregation over a dozen people, almost all to old age. Not only are we still here, we have more people than before.
- We don't know what the coming years, or even *next month* will bring: what will we do then?

In our passage, Paul and others set out by ship for Rome. They take their journey in a time when sea voyages are more risky than usual. Winter is coming on, the winds are unpredictable, the sea is large, the vessels are (relatively) small, they navigate by landmarks and the stars, have no modern technology...

What will the journey bring, and how does it inform us for navigating whatever is coming next in our lives?

Proposition: *Despite every hindrance, the work of God always accomplishes God's purposes — our call is to keep on serving in his mission.*

I. The shipwreck story

A. The journey begins (1)

1. All legal obstacles concluded, the journey begins (recall ch. 26 and earlier)
2. Paul (and other prisoners) consigned to Julius, a centurion
 - a. The other prisoners aren't specified
 - 1) Probably not fellow Romans appealing for trial in Rome
 - 2) More likely "convicted criminals to be killed in the games for the entertainment of the Roman public."³

³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ac 27.1.

b. Julius is “of the Augustan cohort”

- 1) The name puzzles the commentators
- 2) Some special connection to the Emperor (Gk. *Sebastes*)
- 3) Will secure shipping, make the decisions for the company on the journey

3. Also note another “we” section begins:

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy

- a. Paul accompanied by Luke
- b. And by a convert named Aristarchus (2)

We will talk more about the details of sailing in the 1st century in a later message.

B. The four scenes of the journey

1. The voyage to Fair Havens (1-8)

- a. The journey hugs the coastline (ancients feared the open sea)
- b. The first leg is in a coastal vessel to Myra, where they find an Alexandrian grain ship headed for Rome
- c. They head west with difficulty, ending the first leg in a place called “Fair Havens”

2. The storm at sea (9-44)

- a. They set out on a favorable wind; it quickly becomes dangerous
- b. The storm is so violent they lose hope
 - 1) Start throwing over the cargo
 - 2) Throw out the ships tackle
- c. Paul gives a message of reassurance from the Lord: see v. 24

Ac 27.24 saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’

“The central verse...” of the chapter⁴

⁴ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 512.

- d. After two weeks they perceive shallow water and fear smashing against the rocks (27-29)
- e. Sailors try to escape, Paul speaks to the centurion, they are kept on board

Ac 27.31 Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved."

- f. Paul encourages all to take food to prepare for the coming shipwreck, then they throw out the rest of the cargo ("the wheat", v. 38)
- g. The next day they strike a reef near Malta, the ship is lost, but all are saved

3. Two scenes in chapter 28

- a. The fire on the beach, where Paul escapes a poisonous snake (28.1-8)
- b. The triumphant completion of the journey to Rome (28.9-16)
 - 1) Includes healing ministry and preaching in Malta
 - 2) Concludes with a final trip by sea to Italy, where the saints of Rome receive Paul gladly (though still under guard)

The dangers of this chapter are both sudden and mostly unexpected.

- The time of year made the voyage somewhat risky, but not impossible (the grain ship was already on the journey)
- The snake latching on the hand was a complete surprise

These dangers were real and violent, but the Lord delivered the company despite the trials.

II. Theological back story

A. God is in control (27.24)

Ac 27.24 saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.'

"The overarching theme of the shipwreck narrative is the providence of God. The central verse is 27:24: God delivered Paul and all who sailed with him for the ultimate purpose of the apostle's witness before Caesar. ... It is perhaps the major theme of Acts—the triumph of the witness to Christ."⁵

1. This message, in the middle of the storm, just confirms God's will about this mission
 - a. Paul announced his determination to go to Rome way back in Ephesus, several years before (Ac 19.21)
 - b. When Paul was threatened by the angry mob in Jerusalem, the Lord assured him that he would make it to Rome (Ac 23.11)

Ac 23.11 ¶ But on the night *immediately* following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

2. The whole journey, while dangerous and harrowing, could not frustrate God's purpose
 - a. Note: God didn't need Paul to accomplish his purpose
 - b. There already was a Christian church in Rome, for example
 - c. But God clearly purposed for Paul to conduct this mission
 - d. Since that time, many harrowing circumstances threatened the Lord's work: it persists to this day

The overarching theme of the providence of our sovereign God is a major lesson of the last chapters in the book of Acts.

⁵ Polhill, 512.

B. God's messengers are foundational figures

1. Through this story we see a change in status for Paul in the eyes of the observers (especially the centurion)
 - a. First, Paul the prisoner (1), though kindly treated (3)
 - b. Paul ignored (10-11)
 - c. Paul respected (21, 25, see also 31-32)
 - d. Paul taking leadership (34-36)
 - e. Paul acting as an apostle (miracles) (28.1-10)
 - f. Paul triumphant (though still imprisoned) (28.11-16)
2. Paul does no signs until the ship is wrecked
 - a. The storm isn't stilled (not sure Paul had *that* power)
 - b. The signs come as blessings for the lost, as Paul will spend three months preaching in Malta

Kellum puts it this way: "Paul is God's messenger, not some sort of divine man, who commands nature"⁶
 - c. The message is paramount, not the messenger

C. God's mission compasses the empire

1. In Acts 1.8, Jesus made a promise to the apostles

Ac 1.8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

- a. Rome isn't "the remotest part of the earth"
- b. Yet the mission from Jerusalem to Rome stands analogously for that worldwide mission
- c. It marks a remarkable expansion through the 1st c. world

⁶ Kellum, *Acts*, 296.

2. Throughout Acts, we have what Polhill calls the “journey motif”⁷
- Through the book, we remarked on many travelogues Luke supplied (many placenames)
 - What is the point? I think gospel progress is the point

Polhill again: “It was not the apostles who triumphed in Acts—it was the gospel that triumphed. Stephen is the prime example. He gave his life for that witness. But out of the tragedy of his death, the gospel triumphed—spread to Samaria, and all Judea, and ultimately to the ends of the earth.”⁸

- The placenames continue to produce fruit:

“Some years ago a little group of freethinkers in Scotland decided on a plan whereby they might show up the inaccuracies of Scripture, and so cause people to realize, as they put it, that the Bible was not really the Word of God. One member was given the task of going to Asia Minor and Southern Europe and the islands of the Mediterranean, and visiting all the places mentioned by Luke in connection with Paul’s journeys. It was hoped that he would be able to unearth so much information as would make evident the falsity of Luke’s record, that many who had pinned their faith to the book of Acts as a part of God’s inspired Word would have to give it up.

“The young man chosen was Sir Wm. Ramsay. He investigated very carefully, and after the most minute examinations concluded that Luke was absolutely accurate in every particular; and he himself, once a freethinker, became a Christian, and has written some splendid books in defense of the Word of God.”⁹

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 511.

⁸ Polhill, 512.

⁹ H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1943), 618–19.

3. In our day, Christian missions encircle the globe, with men and women serving, preaching, teaching worldwide

The mission of Christ will persist, despite every obstacle circumstance throws our way.

Conclusion:

What should we think about all this?

Proposition: Despite every hindrance, the work of God always accomplishes God's purposes — our call is to keep on serving in his mission.

We should think that we have a part to play in the mission.

- God's gospel is our gospel.
- God's program is our program.
- God's mission is our mission.

We should join the task, take up the burden, preach the word everywhere, and see what God will do.